



Bear Braumoeller

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Harvard University



**"Systemic Politics:
The Great Powers in General
(Dis-)Equilibrium"**

**Friday, May 20, 2005
12:00 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120**

[Watch](#)

Bear F. Braumoeller (PhD, University of Michigan) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Government at Harvard, and a Faculty Associate at both the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and the Davis Center for Russian and East European Studies. Professor Braumoeller's interests include the sources of war and conflict, political methodology (tailoring statistical methodology to fit the particular needs of students of world politics), international relations theory (in particular, systemic theories of international relations), and Russian foreign affairs (especially the relationship between belief systems and foreign policy behavior).

Synopsis of Talk:

For over a quarter of a century, Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* has been used by many political realists to explain the behavior of states in the international system. Bear Braumoeller came to Mershon to discuss what he maintains is a "new systemic theory of international relations." According to Braumoeller, systemic theories of international relations, those that claim the international anarchic environment constrains and determines how states will behave in relation to one another, have borne skepticism from other scholars of international relations. They claim that systemic theory cannot be tested because there is no practical way to isolate the important variables. Responding to this criticism, Braumoeller attempted to create a systemic theory of international relations that is testable and pieces together all of the parts of the international system that have been studied in isolation from each other by scholars before him.

According to Braumoeller's theory, states are the individual units situated in the prevailing structure, defined as the distribution of power, capabilities, or ideology. Together, the interactions of states and the structure produce an international system. Braumoeller maintained that existing theories do not lend themselves to empirical testing and has sought to develop a systemic theory which can be tested through real world data. "Parts have been studied separately, I try to put them together in a way that makes sense," he said. His methodology, called "ordered complexity" is designed to explain three trends: how states shape the international structure, how the structure shapes states, and how these processes occur over time.

According to Braumoeller the international system is defined by the structure and individual components, states. He used the distribution of goods in the international system to measure the structure, which he calls balance of power and balance of ideology. For Braumoeller goods are defined by whatever is important to states at a certain period in history. He gave the example of how the distribution of nutmeg was an important ordering principle of the international structure because around the 16th century nutmeg was thought to cure the plague which led states to seek this valuable commodity and the presence of which ultimately defined which states were most powerful in the system. The effect of individual states, or units, on the system

included leaders' world views, the preferences and choices of domestic publics, and the impact of state power on the distribution of goods.

Where Braumoeller deviated from previous "systemic theorists" is in his attempt to empirically test his argument through a series of mathematical derivations and statistical methods. He presented data on levels of power measured in terms of the goods most important at each time period from 1815 until the late twentieth century. In order to obtain data on the ideology of states from as far back as the beginning of the 19th century, Braumoeller surveyed multiple historians. He used this data to predict the "levels of activity" in the international system among major powers including, the United Kingdom , France , Prussia , Austria , and Russia . According to Braumoeller, the levels of activity are a reflection of state leaders crafting their foreign policy in response to domestic demands for change. The more a state seeks to change the distribution of goods in the system in its favor, the levels of activity for that state will increase, in relation to other states. This activity reveals how states, as units, interact with the structure, the distribution of goods and ideologies, to produce an international system, Braumoeller claimed.

While testing is still in its early phases, Braumoeller maintains that initial tests corroborate his theory of "ordered complexity," which accounts for both the behavior of states and the arrangement of the system's structure, or where states stood in relation to each other at different points during the time period he tested. According to Braumoeller, other scholars have neglected one level of international politics in order to explain the problems and questions raised by the other level, while this new systemic theory assesses the micro and macro levels of international politics and how they interact to produce a single international system.

*The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Mershon Center of
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